

Anglers against Poachers: Sea trout successfully spawned in the river Tartak, Belarus

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According to Vatslav Blazhevich, a resident of the Tartak village and an environmentalist, more than 50 female sea trout went upstream river Tartak this autumn. And what is unusual, almost all of them spawned successfully! Vatslav could not quite remember when such a large number of sea trout successfully spawned in the river Tartak last time. Probably when he was a little boy, but Vatslav has recently turned 60. The question is what is it that made so many sea trout to spawn without any problems this time?



It has always been that poachers took almost all spawning sea trout from the local rivers. Tartak is a small shallow river, about 5 km long and 3-5 m wide, with crystal clear water. Spawning sea trout is an easy prey to anyone with a spear, it does not take longer than a few seconds to kill and take out the poor fish. And the State Wildlife Inspectorate may not be of much help; even with the prior warning they are unlikely to act faster than the poachers, because there are only 3 inspectors for the whole district of the area about 1000 km².

The only way to effectively stop poachers is to organize a regular river patrol during the spawning season, the way similar to what is being done in the neighboring Lithuania. Since I became the CCB project coordinator several years ago I have been trying to encourage the government authorities in Belarus to organize such patrol at least in one local district, but without any success.

In 2009 things began to look a bit more promising since my voice was heard by NGO, Belarus Society for the Protection of Birds, who agreed to provide volunteers to help to run the river patrol during the spawning season. Several groups of university students visited regularly (and even stayed overnight) the river Vilia and its tributaries in the Ostroverts District. It was the first time ever in Belarus when the general public actively took part in salmon protection.

In 2010 the volunteer river patrol during the spawning season was organized much better, and much more professional. The patrol consisted of about 12 persons and it was done by the

members of the Belarus Angling Club, PEREKAT. The leader of the Club, Evgeny Kanarsky, is not a stranger to the problem since he was involved in the first CCB Salmon Round Table which I organized in Belarus in 2006. He recently opened a new section in the on-line forum on the club's website www.perekat.com, uploaded my article about the situation with the salmon protection, and issued an appeal for volunteers to get involved in the river patrol to protect sea trout from poachers. And he personally led the first volunteer patrol on the river Tartak.

The anglers employed a very good strategy. They put up tents on the river bank and did regular walks along the river day and night. Poachers, who are mostly local residents, simply did not show up. While on the river patrol, anglers took both still and video images of the spawning sea trout. The images and comments were uploaded on www.perekat.com and this triggered a lively forum discussion. It appeared that more volunteers would like to take part in the patrol and to take pictures of the spawning sea trout. The more pictures and comments appeared in the on-line forum the more people were getting involved. The volunteers were very observant providing comments on the number of fish went upstream, the number of fish seen spawning, and also on some local guys scared off by volunteers.



The interesting thing is that volunteer groups were organising themselves on-line through the forum. From the 1st of November to the 10th of December 2010 14 volunteer groups took part in the river patrol, one after another, keeping more or less continuous presence on the spot. It is about 150 km by road from Minsk to the river Tartak and some of the fuel costs were covered by the CCB project, but all the rest, transportation, equipment and food was provided by volunteers.

This volunteer action received good coverage in three newspapers and on three websites in Belarus. Those who are able to read Russian could visit www.perekat.com